Short story

Samba Like This

Does Bossa Nova have a soul?

I

The waves rolled back into the sea, revealing the wet sand. The waves crashed loudly, with regularity. A bunch of kids were playing soccer with a plastic ball, leaving footprints all over the beach. It was sunset, and Davi was finishing up his third drink at a beach kiosk. The vodka made his throat tighten, but the cold feeling from the melting ice hit the spot on yet another hot, muggy afternoon. He clutched his side, right around his liver. That pain was way too familiar. The waiter brought over a plate with grilled ham and cheese. *"Hell of a breakfast,"* Davi thought. He only ate half the sandwich, and headed back to the Copacabana Palace Hotel.

Some forty years ago, he was the next big thing in bossa nova, the talk of the town. While it didn't go quite like that, some thirty years ago, he maybe more for the highbrow crowd, an acquired taste. And some twenty years ago, he accepted the fact that he would never, ever be a star musician. But he learned the hits of other artists, all the bossa classics, and made

a decent living traveling the world, playing bossa nova for tourists who didn't really get it. Now that some American investors bought the Copa, the affectionate nickname for the hotel, they offered him a room and a resident gig. Foreigners thought he was the absolute best. He wasn't in a position to turn down the offer, let alone tell them the truth.

Every night he had a setlist to get through. And a bottle to help him do it. The Copa's scotch was top-shelf, which only fueled his appetite for a drink. The days slowly blurred into a haze of piano and booze, and his sleep schedule shifted from a normal 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., to a 5 a.m. to 3 p.m. routine, like only the best bohemians manage. Today was no different, and he was already pregameing for the night with a few drinks by the beach.

Walking up the sidewalk, he took a discreet glance at the young women running along the boardwalk. Young, beautiful, full of life. He loved watching them. Most guys would just wait for them to pass to check out their asses, but Davi preferred watching them run toward him, admiring their sheer vitality: the flushed faces, the dripping sweat, the laughs mid-conversation. How did they manage to chat while running so fast? And laugh on top of it? He saw beauty in femininity. But that was the part that fascinated him the most. Those beautiful smiles he was no longer capable of truly giving.

His nightly shows had very few genuine smiles. Most people were there for the steaks the restaurant served. The very few who were actually there for the music weren't there to appreciate it. They were there to put on a show, to fake a sophistication they knew they didn't have. He knew he was

playing for an audience that was either indifferent or phony. His music didn't connect with anyone, not even himself.

Feeling like tonight wouldn't be any different, he lit his Cuban cigar, opened his bottle of scotch, sat down at the piano, and started. The stage lighting turned the humid night into a greenhouse, and he rehydrated himself directly from the bottle.

A few chords, and slowly, some non descript bossa nova classic drifted from the keys. As he played along with muscle memory and no effort, this hissing entered his ears, which he immediately ascribed to alcohol induced tinnitus. He decided not to bother singing, keeping it strictly instrumental. It didn't make a difference to anyone, and it meant a little less effort for him.

He got pulled back into the moment when a cold drift dried the sweat from the back of neck, making his shoulders drop and his jaw relax with relief. He had asked the hotel staff to do something about climatization since his first performance. Soon the drift passed, but it was enough to revitalize him.

He was getting close to the end of his set when he noticed an older woman, maybe in her 60s, sitting alone at the bar with her eyes closed, listening intently to the music. It was the first time in months he'd noticed someone actually enjoying the sound. It was comforting that at least one bossa nova fan was in the room. With a renewed spark, he sang the last song, "Marina," in his favorite version, the Chico Buarque arrangement.

"I remember you very well, Mr. Davi," she said, approaching him as soon as he stepped off the stage. "Can I buy you a drink in exchange for a chat?" she continued.

"It will be a pleasure to enjoy both, ma'am...?" he asked. "You can just call me Helena," she said.

They sat at the bar. The bartender, immaculately dressed and a bohemian just like Davi, did his best to set the mood. Champagne for the lady, scotch on the rocks for the gentleman, a lightly scented candle, and a few cherries for snacking, to help mask the smell of alcohol coming off both of them.

"Mr. Davi," she started. "Just Davi, please, no 'Mr.'," he broke in.

"I have a request, Davi," she said. "I'm afraid it's going to sound like a very strange request, but I know you're the only person who could do what I'm wishing for."

Davi leaned in. He was intrigued. "Is it for me to play a song or...?" he muttered. Helena let out a long, soft laugh. He held his drink, and rocked the ice.

"Oh, it's much worse than that. You see, I'm a *carioca*. I was born and raised here in Rio, right here in Copacabana, actually. I lived here until my early twenties, married an American, and moved to the US," she explained.

"Ah, so that's why you know me," Davi exclaimed.

"Yes, yes, I know your fame is more international than local. But I had all your records, Davi. I listened to them every day, missing this city so, so much," she continued.

"I'm intrigued, Helena. What's your request?" Davi said.

"Let me explain a little more. I need to explain. It's so strange that I won't feel right if I don't explain everything, okay?" she said. Davi nodded, and she went on.

"I lost my husband a few years ago. We lived a wonderful life together, had two fantastic kids that I love dearly. But the kids grew up and got married, and you know what, they're

Americans, those boys. They don't understand certain things. Certain charms. Certain feelings. Oh, I can't explain it, and I'm already sounding like a crazy old lady. I have no regrets, Davi, none at all."

Davi had forgotten about his drink, completely caught up in Helena's story.

"I've seen you around, on the beach. You know, watching the women," she continued. Davi felt his heart race, raising his hands in an apologetic gesture.

"Oh, no, please, I can see your heart right away, and I know what you're looking at. You're not ogling, you're just watching. I've seen you smile, your shoulders relax, and the wrinkle on your forehead vanish just from seeing a woman. You love women, in your own way," she continued.

"I want you to write a song about me," Helena said. "There, I said it. I sound like a crazy old lady."

Davi finally picked up his glass and downed it in one gulp. He noticed the ice was still rock solid, and put one cube in his mouth, feeling it melt away with a refreshing feeling.

"I'd love to, but I haven't written anything in over thirty years," he said.

Helena took a deep breath. "My request gets worse, Davi. Oh, it gets worse."

"I want you to write a song about me when I was young. Oh, my goodness. I've always had this dream. To be a beach girl. To be the Girl from Ipanema. That my mere presence would make someone write a masterpiece. And I need to emphasize one thing, it's very important to me to emphasize this. I felt loved, I feel loved. My husband was a good man who loved and valued me. Oh, but this silly girlhood dream. This frivolous little thing

inside my heart. How I would love to be the Girl from Ipanema, Davi," she continued.

Davi laughed. This was interesting, to say the least.

"It can get a little stranger, Davi," she went on. "I brought some pictures of myself from when I was young. To help you."

"Oh, Helena, I couldn't. This, I just..." He was at a loss for words. He tried to read her face, but she was looking inside her purse, searching for the photos. She handed them over, and he noticed tears falling down her face. She handed him an envelope. "I'm in room 61 for now. I'm sixty-one years old. I thought it fit. I'll come down every now and then. Davi, please, try to do this for me?"

He nodded, and she abruptly stood up and walked away. He instinctively held his cup for another sip, forgetting he had already downed it. It was all water, the ice had melted away. He realized his alcohol consumption was bad enough that he was losing track of time now. He ordered a bottle of water and went up to his room.

He sat on the bed, swinging his legs, feeling nervous. He couldn't compose a thing even if his life depended on it. Still, that conversation had totally twisted his head around. He couldn't get his thoughts straight. *"I don't even know this woman. But man, what a woman. Elegant, grounded, even when making absurd requests!"* he thought. He noticed she was full of vibrant contrasts like that: her voice was raspy yet soft all at once. Her posture was straight but relaxed. Her skin was pale and firm.

He opened the envelope and pulled out the first photo. A young, tanned girl with a face full of freckles. She was wearing a hat and a trendy bikini, sitting on a beach lounge chair, holding her sunglasses in her hand. And she looked pissed—a

scowl that didn't invite anyone near, shoulders tense, lips pressed tight. He picked up the second photo. Same woman, same place, same situation. But instead of the scowl, she wore a beautiful, wide smile, showing her teeth, crinkling her eyes just a bit. The photos were definitely taken seconds apart. There were a few more pictures in the envelope, but for now, he left only those two out.

He grabbed his acoustic guitar and opened the balcony door, inviting the ocean breeze inside. He took a deep breath, feeling the cool air. He held the guitar, got ready, and... nothing. He couldn't play a single chord based on that feeling. He could think of plenty of classics he could play right on the spot. But he couldn't give shape or contour to that specific sensation. He needed more of her.

II

Davi didn't think about it again for the next week, slipping back into his routine of sleeping late, drinking early, and playing lazy piano sessions. He didn't see Helena around anymore, and figured the whole thing had just died out. But another night came, and once again, there she was, eyes closed, right by the bar. He noticed her beautiful, colorful dress and sophisticated hairstyle. That feeling of fascination came rushing back. His fingers hesitated on the piano keys, and he made a mistake or two that brought a smile to her face. She knew her presence made him nervous, and she absolutely loved it.

As the end of the set drew near, she moved over to a table, ordered a steak, and asked the waiter to tell Davi she was inviting him to sit down. He didn't wait around to join her. She

got the impression he might have skipped a few songs, eager to talk again, but she couldn't be sure.

"I hope I didn't scare you off too much, Davi," she started, cutting straight to the chase.

"I'll be honest, Helena. I tried, but I couldn't do it. I'm no songwriter," he replied.

The waiter arrived with the plates, and she gestured that the steak was for Davi. But she stayed quiet, just looking at him with a relaxed, gentle smile. Davi stared back, trying to catch any cue, trying to understand this person a little better, but he just couldn't. He decided to try and find out more about her.

"I looked at a couple of the photos. I couldn't stop thinking about how the one where you look pissed and mad, and the one where you're smiling and happy, were taken so close together," he said.

"That girl was easy to anger and slow to calm down, I can tell you that much. You only looked at two photos?" Her curious tone gave away that Davi had been caught.

"After those two, I realized I'd never get to know you through pictures. I wanted to know more about you. Maybe about who you are right now," he replied.

"Oh, no, Davi. I'm begging you for one more absurd request. Don't ask anything about me now. I'm just an old, retired lady, nothing interesting. I want you to know *her*, that beautiful young girl in the photos," she countered.

He nodded. "I'll play by your rules. But I have mine too," he said. She told him to go on. "I've never written a single good song in my entire life. All those records you had, I was just interpreting other people's masterpieces. I can't just whip up a 'Girl from Ipanema.' So, for you, I will try, but I need your help

with one thing." She readily agreed. "Bossa Nova is made of melancholy. Tell me the memories that make up your melancholy."

She thought about it. Her hands moved across the table in a slow, steady gesture. "Okay. Sounds fair. We start tonight—call my room when you're done here," she said. Taking his time, he finished his dinner, distracted by the memory of her perfume. It had a musky, tobacco feeling to it, he found it familiar, unexpected. Of all things, her scent seemed to be what sharpened his senses the most. And what lingered the longest, too; he was still thinking about it when he got back to his room.

He pulled another photo from the envelope. It was a nighttime shot in a hotel room, and from the look of the balcony door, it was right there in the Copacabana Palace. The moonlight leaked inside, tracing her silhouette. She held a cigarette in her right hand and wore a comfortable, loose blue beach dress that looked a little puffed up by the sea breeze.

It was already 2 in the morning, he couldn't quite figure out what was going on, so he picked up the phone and dialed her room, number 61.

"Davi, just come over", she said on the phone. He felt ashamed of how taken he was by her, so he opened his drawer and picked up an old tape recorder. It was his talisman to prove he was going to her room for inspiration, not because he wanted to sleep with her.

He knocked, and she greeted him. She was wearing the hotel robe. That perfume scent again, he thought, as he observed her move around and sit by the window. His mind couldn't help but wonder what was under the robe. This thought triggered a mix of shame and immediacy, and he asked her to record her story

on the tape recorder, and she agreed. They sat down at the table next to the bed, bathed by the moonlight.

"It was a late summer night! I must have spent the whole day in that chair on the beach. I remember my skin feeling sticky from all the tanning oil and sea spray. I must have taken two or three showers that day, but my skin still felt sticky, so I threw on that really loose dress to go out with my girlfriends. We went to a little bar, a *boteco*, and spent the whole night drinking cold beer and eating finger food. Every now and then, a guy or two would come by the table, but we'd brush them off real quick. You know why? Oh, my friends and I, there were three of us. Me, Beatrice, and Lilian. We were such difficult women. Competitive, sensitive, dramatic. But that night, by some miracle, there was none of that. It felt like the perfect dream of a friendship. No digs at each other. No hidden resentment. We joked around, we laughed so hard. And we didn't want any guy ruining that, so we just... scared them away!"

He was surrounded by noises that kept him from fully entering her story. The tape recorder hummed, the air conditioning clacked, the lamp hissed a high pitch noise. But he forced himself to focus on her again.

"Afterward, we went walking around. First, we stopped at a juice bar to cool off. I think I got acerola. I used to love those fresh tropical juices. We went down to the water and walked along the sand. We felt the waves washing over our feet. The breeze was strong that night, I even got a little chilly at times. Then we came to the hotel. We asked to pay for a room in cash, and would you believe they gave us one for free? The girl at the front desk said she'd seen us playing around Copacabana since we were kids, and the room was empty anyway, so we could

stay. But the room was an oven, super stuffy. We opened the balcony door to let the cool breeze in and sat down to talk some more and take in that magical night."

By now he was completely absorbed by her. He still wasn't paying attention to what she was saying, but instead he noticed the occasional husk in her voice, the movements of her face, the rich expressions in her eyes, the bittersweet smile.

"Would you believe I kept that dress? I still have it, and brought it here with me. It's a personal treasure. I must sound so crazy to you..." She let the words hang in the air.

Davi looked at the balcony door, trying to picture Helena and a couple of friends dancing in a stuffy hotel room, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, playing cards, and talking, just talking and laughing. The image felt bittersweet to him. He felt like Helena was trying to relive that feeling. As if, underneath the elegant layer of that sophisticated woman, the young girl still wanted to come out and play. That was remarkable, he thought. And confusing. Her contrasts kept his eyes wide open, waiting to see what would come next.

"Would you wear it for me?", he asked. He blurted out even, it was an unmeasured spur of the moment question.

She smiled, and stood up. She untied her robe, and dropped it on the floor, revealing her nude body. "Aren't we lucky this tape recorder doesn't record video?", she said, playfully. His eyes opened wide, fixated on her. She slowly walked towards the closet. His chest felt warm, but his body felt cold. Time was stretching out, moving slowly. She put on the dress, it was bright blue, she kept it in perfect condition. As she adjusted her hair, Davi could almost see her as the young woman in the picture again.

Helena noticed Davi's hands moving as if he was playing the piano. She laughed and asked, "Are you that happy to see me?", and pointed to his hands. Davi looked at his hands, and felt an overwhelming sense of panic, the room spinning in a vertigo, and fled the room. He bumbled around the corridor, finally going downstairs, sitting down at the piano, playing the bars going over and over in his mind.

He was playing in a chaotic manner, rushed, nervous, shaking. His eyes closed, he thought of Helena undressing for him, over and over. Her delicate hands picking each side of the robe, and playfully dropping it. He couldn't control his fingers, leading to mistakes, some dissonant, some pure inspiration in the beautiful song that was coming out of the piano.

Helena against the moonlight, walking through the room. Just as lively tonight, as she ever was. The melancholy flowed out of his piano, now more gently. He saw through Helena, just like she wanted him to. He understood her sadness, and her quest for joy. His hands trembled, and his eyes looked away. He was embarrassed, even fearful. The empty room echoed the piano sound, and he let himself go, hitting it with a freedom he hadn't felt before. It was loud, and he knew it, and he enjoyed it.

The breeze on his neck was more than refreshing, it was freezing, and made his jaw tremble. He kept playing until sunrise, discovering the most sublime bossa nova, and he genuinely believed it was superior to any song he ever performed before.

III

That night, Davi left the hotel and went straight to a recording studio. He laid down the first version of his album in a single, two hour long session, and walked over with the demo recordings to the offices of his record label. His producer was enchanted, and green lit a new album based on that demo session. He fell asleep on the couch of the label's office, and only woke up the next day.

"Ah, Mr Davi, you're finally up!", he heard a lightweight, cheerful, feminine voice from somewhere, but he was still too confused to understand. He sat down on the couch, and the smell of fresh coffee took over the room. "Just one more moment, please!", the voice said.

In walked a tall and confident young woman, carrying a tray with coffee and a grilled ham and cheese sandwich. "I made it myself, so please be gentle on the criticism", she said, with a large smile on her face. "I'm sorry, I just am your biggest fan, so meeting you is taking my breath away. You are the whole reason I chose to work at this label!", she continued.

The office was in an old building in Copacabana, and it showed. There was no air conditioning, and the fans on the ceiling were running at full speed, leaving a humming sound, and pushing down the air that felt warm and humid. Some of the walls were solid, but some of them were wooden, probably because the office was renewed without permission. There were records and awards on the walls, old artists and new. This label prided itself in staying true to Brazilian culture, and Davi always found it ironic that they signed him, the biggest disappointment in Brazilian music. "What is more Brazilian

than being an eternal promise?", the owner told him once, during a long conversation about his disappointing career.

Davi reached out for the coffee, and looked at her with attention. She looked stunning. Her smile flowed freely from her, without asking for any conditions, her happiness unconditional. She wore baggy jeans and a band t-shirt, which was cut to be asymmetrical and reveal one of her shoulders, and display her tan lines. Her dark black hair was long, full, brushed. In shorter words, she was absolutely fantastic.

"Did you happen to hear my demo?", he asked. She reached over him to pick up a tablet that was on the couch, and showed him her notes on the demo. She nailed it, he thought, she nailed exactly the essence of every single song, she understood the spirit of the whole album. As she moved around, he could smell her faint perfume, it was a light floral scent.

As they reviewed the notes together, Davi ignored his phone ringing. He only had eyes and ears to the uplifting presence of this woman. He was gathering his thoughts, trying to find interesting ways to impress her. "I'll be honest with you. The whole reason I made this album was because of this woman called Helena...", he said.

"Between the neighborhoods of Leblon, Ipanema, and Copacabana, maybe Helena might be the most common name for a woman. The name of the bossa nova.", she replied. "But she must have been quite something, because this work is breathtaking..."

"I wasn't there, and suddenly, I was. It's not that I was hiding, I just had nothing to say. And suddenly, I had. And I just needed to say it, once. And I was satisfied...", he said. She looked at him with loving eyes, and calmly held his hand. Instead of looking

deep into his eyes, she was looking at him, as a whole, with what he could only describe as adoration. “And now I said it. I left it all on the demo. And you got what I said. Now I can go back to having nothing to say”, he said.

They finished going over her notes, and she asked permission to book the recording studio for him to work on the recording. He agreed. She confessed she had already booked it, and that the sessions would start early, 8 in the morning, for a month. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there, so try to wake up early for me”, she said.

He left the office feeling relaxed. He finally picked up his phone, and his agent was desperately trying to reach out. The Copa had decided to fire him because he was a no show for last night. They gathered his stuff on a small box and dropped it at the agent’s place. Davi asked him to send his stuff to the label office, and headed back in.

“Turns out I just lost my job and my home.”, he told the woman as he walked back in. “Can I crash on this couch for a while?”, he asked.

She looked at him, with a tender look. He felt comfortable with how easy to understand she was. Her emotions were clear as day.

“Of course, but I have a crazy, if better offer for you. Why don’t you crash at my place instead? I have room”, she replied.

He thought of how his wave of inspiration came from a single moment of honest desire and expression, and simply said yes. “Maybe life is meant to be lived”, he said. This time he didn’t feel a wave of inspiration, but he did feel relieved.

“Davi, I am gonna turn off the lights now”, she said. Her smile had turned playful, and he thought she couldn’t be more perfect.

As she turned off the lights in the office and walked towards him taking off her shirt, he barely noticed that the humming of the lamp was still hissing in his ears even after the room was only lit by the sunset. Later they made their way to her apartment. During the day, it was always bright from sunlight, a spacious unit in a beautiful residential building in Ipanema, a few minutes away from Copacabana. It was in her family for generations, she said, and now it was her turn to care for it.

The month passed by easily for Davi. They were sitting down in her kitchen, while she prepared coffee and his favorite grilled ham and cheese. She also made a fresh green smoothie and packed fruits for the recording session snacks. He observed her, with wonder. She had the vitality he yearned for, the smile, the laughter. Her energy was endless. She brightened every room she entered with her presence. He felt he could almost grasp this vitality, it was almost within his reach, when he watched her. She drove him to the studio every morning, helped him through long and arduous recording sessions, advised him on his life habits, prepared healthy meals, all while holding a genuine smile in her face.

During a smoke break, the studio engineer approached Davi, and asked him about his girlfriend. “I will just tell you one thing, and that is that I am jealous as hell, Mr Davi. I suppose certain men are just lucky.”, the engineer said.

“I’ll tell you, man. It’s not like she doesn’t have flaws. I mean, she is a woman, right? She comes and goes, and has her ups and downs, and she gets this look in her face sometimes, when I

have a drink, and I'll tell you, that look feels like pure shame. But it's delightful, it's just delightful. Those waves that she makes me ride are the pure essence of life, it's all so easy. She has no idea how wonderful she is. That's how she ends up with a has-been like me. Has never been, I would say. ", Davi replied.

"I see, old man, you are in love. All of us are, you are the lucky bastard. ", the engineer said, smiling.

"Sometimes just being near her, I don't even have to touch her. Just being next to her, and getting a small whiff of her perfume...", Davi said.

"Ah, that musky, tobacco-like scent", the engineer said.

IV

Davi asked to hold the album release party at the Copa. He said he wanted to play it again on that piano, under that draft, where it all started. The recital started early in the evening, and he was there on time. With no pain in his body, well rested, and satisfied, he was pleasant to his guests, shared jokes and old stories, performed to a technical level that he hadn't achieved since his youth, and received a standing ovation. He was absolutely unsatisfied. He had to hide his souring mood, but even that was not that difficult, he had a lot of room to spare, and could easily put on a face.

He asked his girlfriend for a walk on the beach, the best feeling in Copacabana, he said. She promptly accepted. They started on the sidewalk, and he joyfully observed the people. The night market was still ongoing, and people were buying sandals, balls, street food, snacks, bags, and clothing. Including dresses. Blue dresses. He approached a stall that had second

hand clothing. The blue dress was clearly the one that belonged to Helena. There was no mistake. He asked the salesman about the dress, how he got it. The salesman became defensive, and said everything was above board. Davi said he wasn't making any accusations, he just wanted to know. His girlfriend was enjoying the crazy interaction, and tried to convince the salesman to give more information, but no dice. He asked them to leave.

Davi took his shoes off, and walked barefoot on the sand. His girlfriend held his hand tight. Her reliable, sunny and genuine smile was there, and it soothed his worries for a moment. His mood had changed just like that, and he went from sour to relieved and content. Some people waved them over. They needed an extra person to play doubles beach volleyball. Davi told her to play, and he sat down on the sand. She pulled a pair of shorts from her purse, and put it on, under her dress. Davi observed her ease and elegance. He couldn't help but be fascinated by how easygoing she was. She pulled a bikini top and wore it under her dress, just as easily. With her delicate hands, she pulled her dress up and dropped it on the sand, running to the court. Davi felt a cold breeze chill the back of his neck. It didn't unsettle him per se, but made him aware of how unsettled he was feeling. He needed to see room 61 again.

He stood up and started walking back towards the Copa. The waves were crashing, and he couldn't perceive their tempo. Their sound was more of a hissing sound, like a broken machine. Somehow the crashing of the wave was quiet. He started walking faster, his pace almost running. He hated how this pace felt natural, and he was unbothered by any pains while rushing over to the hotel.

At the reception, he heard the high pitched noise coming from the lamps in the old chandeliers. He asked the receptionist about Mrs Helena in room 61. “You just missed her. She checked out yesterday, Mr Davi.”, she said.

“So the room is available?”, he asked.

“Sure. Would you like to take it?”, the receptionist offered, and Davi accepted.

He made his way to the room, at first at a frantic pace, but by the time he reached the door, he was hesitant, and unsure if he should go ahead. He stood in front of the door, key in hand. And then he heard, once again, the hissing sound from inside. So he reached for the door, unlocked it, turned the handle, and slowly opened the door. To his relief, the room was empty. The moon light was illuminating the room, and it looked beautiful. He walked in, at his own pace, unsure of what was happening, unsure if he wanted to find out. He sat down on the bed, and he could smell the musky, tobacco-like aroma of her perfume again. His fingers went through the bed sheets softly, and his mind wondered about that night. What would have happened if he had stayed here with her.

He looked up, towards the window, to picture her walking in her blue dress, but what he noticed was that his tape recorder was still there. He picked it up, and rewound it. The air conditioning was making noises, his ear filled with a tinnitus so loud it felt like there was a horn inside his head. His hands shook. He held his breath, and played the tape. A loud hissing came out of it. He listened to the tape until the end, and all he could hear was the hissing. A bit calmer, he rewound the tape again, and listened to it again. Once again all he could hear was hissing. And then, once again, he rewound the tape and listened

to it a third time. Hissing. His nerves settled. He opened the balcony door. The ocean felt muted. He could see the waves crashing, but no sound came out of it.

He rewound the tape again, and played it one more time. This time there was no hissing. First a knock, then a high pitched sound, and finally, he heard a voice. It was clearly Helena. But her voice was not husky, there was no rasp. “Lilian, Lilian, it’s your turn. Bet, pass?”, Helena said, laughing. “Pass! Pass! Pass!”, another voice said, and Davi understood that to be Lilian. “I got beers!”, a third voice said, which Davi assumed to be Beatrice.

“This is the perfect night!”, Helena said, laughing. “Not because I am high as a kite! Which I am... But not because of that! It’s because I’m with you two.”, she continued.

“I love you, Helena.”, Lilian said. “I mean it, and I do, and nothing can take it away.”

“We should get married to each other.”, Beatrice said. “The first couple of three crazy cariocas living together, loving each other. Boyfriends coming and going, little bastards with their pressed shirts, and their wandering eyes. But they’ll never get our hearts, because we have each other.”, she said.

“I am married to this beach, to my happiness, to my life”, Helena said. “My husband is the sunset.”

The tape stopped. Davi was feeling love pouring out of his heart. He wanted to hear more of Helena. He rewound the tape, and played it back, but only hissing came out. He kept retrying, over and over, for hours, but only hissing came out. Exhausted, he fell asleep in the bed, feeling the musky scent comforting him.

The next day, Davi made his way to the label office. His girlfriend was already there, waiting for him.

"You disappeared last night! Is everything okay? I waited for you at home", she said.

"I ended up back at that hotel. I don't think I like being there. It feels unsettling, I don't know why I went back", he replied.

"Let me make you some coffee, there is a bunch of work we need to go through. We got some calls from the execs at our parent company, and they are really happy with the buzz your album is making. It shot up to the top of every board and streaming service.", she said, and went to the office cafeteria.

"It's so hot today, can you make me iced coffee?", he asked. She agreed with a nice, loud "sure!".

By himself, Davi walked around, mindlessly looking at the records and awards on the wall. Tom Jobim, Joao Gilberto, Dorival Caymmi, all of his heroes were once a part of this label. He observed the album cover of Elis & Tom, hanging on the wall. In his opinion, the most beautiful manifestation of music was contained in this album. The elegant serenity of Tom Jobim, and the beautiful intensity of Elis Regina blended together, forming the ultimate silent storm, the sublime smile through the pain. In the black and white cover, Tom's smile is subdued, he is almost shy. While Elis is open, laughing, free.

Right next to Elis & Tom, there was an album he didn't notice before. He looked closer. His name, Davi, was written in large letters. The photo was not of him, but of three women, laughing, and hugging, side by side, on the beach. The woman in the middle is wearing a blue dress, with a cigarette in her mouth. This was clearly Helena, Beatrice and Lilian. Davi had no recollection of ever recording this.

His girlfriend came back, and the smell of fresh coffee brought him back. “Did you know this album here?”, he said, pointing to the Davi album.

“Of course, I know all of your work.” she replied. “Remember the track list?”, she said, approached him and took the album off the wall.

As she leaned over him he could smell her perfume, with the naturality that came easy for her. The floral tones were almost imperceptible, but the musky tobacco-like scent was strong. He held her arm. She looked back at him and laughed. He realized his girlfriend had the same laughter as Helena. Exactly the same laughter. The same tone, the same tempo, the same intensity. The exact same cadence.

“Do you know who the women in the album cover are?”, he said. He sounded inquisitive, frantic.

She held the album and observed closely. “I have no idea. Were they your friends?”, she asked. Her smile disarmed him. She genuinely did not know. “We do have a lot of work to go through, shall we start?”, she said. Her voice had a very slight rasp. His ears were filled with a loud, high pitched noise once again. He agreed.

She sat down, and threw her hair back. He loved how long it was. The brushed shape fascinated him. He leaned in to kiss her, which she happily corresponded, and he gently took off her clothes. Her body was young, and looked handmade by an artist. The sunlight through the windows made her look even more gorgeous. After the loving moment, they were hugging the office couch. He looked out the window. The sea was crashing, and he heard no noise from it. He proposed to her, and she immediately said yes.

"Let's live in Ipanema," he said. "Let's move to your place for good." he continued. She was hugging him. He noticed the ice from the coffee cup hadn't melted yet.

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